Brian J. Nichols, Lotus Blossoms and Purple Clouds: Monastic Buddhism in Post-Mao China. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2022

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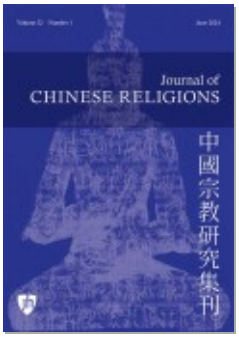
Lotus Blossoms and Purple Clouds: Monastic Buddhism in Post-Mao China by Brian J. Nichols (review)



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texts into interrelated linguistic, spatial, and temporal categories, and for identifying their authors, as long as this is combined with careful textual and historical analysis.

To conclude, Laura Lettere's study of the *Buddhacarita* advances a series of innovative hypotheses relating to the authorship of the poem's Chinese translation, the *Fo suoxing zan*, as well as the latter text's subsequent transmission. By focusing on the transformation of a Sanskrit epic poem into a Chinese text of great religious and political significance via the processes of translation, attribution, and dissemination, Lettere sheds new light on the socio-political dimensions of Buddhist translation practice in fifth-century China. Therefore, this monograph should be considered a landmark study in the history of research into the *Buddhacarita*, translation practice, and cultural transmission in medieval Asia.

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Brian J. Nichols, *Lotus Blossoms and Purple Clouds: Monastic Buddhism in Post-Mao China.* Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2022. xiii, 288 pp. US$28 (pb). ISBN 978-0-8248-9349-1

This rich ethnographic account by Brian J. Nichols tells an astonishing tale of Buddhist resilience and metamorphosis in post-Mao China. Far from doctrinal, philosophical, or textual studies, this is a tale about the living tradition at Quanzhou Kaiyuan Monastery 泉州開元寺, and the monastery's path to legitimacy and survival. Located in Southeast China, Kaiyuan is not an elite or model monastery, but rather an ordinary, urban institution with some fifty monks in residence. However, unlike many other monasteries in China, it managed to overcome every hurdle in its way for 1,300 years, including an attempt by Red Guards to vandalize it during the Cultural Revolution (pp. 1–2). The author, using extensive primary sources and fieldwork at the site where he lived for a total of seven months, explores how the monastery has survived for so long. He relies on local histories, material culture, and oral accounts by lay Buddhists, monks, and administrative personnel to provide a thorough description of Kaiyuan Monastery, while analyzing the strategies it adopted to interact with its political and social environments. Most notably, Nichols's rich ethnographic sources and multidisciplinary approach make for a comprehensive study of Chinese Buddhist monasticism that is grounded in the monastery's physical space, rather than defined by normative discourses about institutional Buddhism.

The book's first two chapters, which constitute part I, provide historical context for Kaiyuan Monastery's development. Chapter 1 highlights the main features that elicited protection and support by political elites up to 1975. The monastery's strength seems to have always derived from its capacity to attract patrons, which it did by highlighting its historical and cultural significance, the auspicious events surrounding its founding (including the titular lotus blossoms and purple clouds), and the presence of eminent monks. Nichols takes us through every phase of growth, consolidation, decline, and restoration in Kaiyuan's long existence, identifying the influence of "patronage by elites, the regulatory and interventionist state, and modulations in material culture" (p. 47). Of particular interest to scholars of modern and contemporary Buddhism is the "curatorial turn" (p. 38) taken in the 1950s after the accession of the Communist party, as the PRC government encouraged monasteries to promote their historical and cultural significance. Kaiyuan

Monastery's leaders had promoted its significance since the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), and their continuation of this work in the 1950s resulted in the monastery's recognition as a Provincial Level Protected Heritage Site in 1961. Generally speaking, the monastery's history is marked by unusual longevity and resilience, which Nichols suggests might be a consequence of its early curatorial goals—described as a tendency to preserve cultural and historical properties.

Chapter 2 contextualizes this resilience by turning to Kaiyuan Monastery's institutional development from 1976 to the present. In the post-Mao era, the monastery has undergone full renovation of what the author calls "hardware" (p. 52), meaning equipment and financial resources. Finding new sources of income is one of the biggest challenges Buddhist monasteries face in contemporary China, and this theme permeates the whole book. At Kaiyuan Monastery, monks quite skillfully chose to diversify their revenue streams by relying on overseas donations, official funding, rituals, earnings from *nianfo* 念佛 days, and entrance tickets, for their survival. Yet, the same patronage patterns still apply: monasticism was allowed to endure at Kaiyuan by gaining support from influential Buddhist and political leaders such as Zhao Puchu 趙樸初 (1907–2000), by complying with state regulations, and by emphasizing material culture to justify raising funds. The era of the current abbot, Daoyuan 道元 (b. 1935), is characterized by revivalism rather than renovation, understood not as a revival of religious cultivation and study, but as recuperating monastic properties and autonomy in temple management.

Part II of *Lotus Blossoms and Purple Clouds* delves into every aspect of religious life at Kaiyuan Monastery. Chapter 3 first thoroughly examines the devotional and liturgical practices of both monks and lay people, based on detailed daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly schedules and calendars. Nichols also adopts an experiential approach that allows for vivid descriptions of how it feels to participate in religious practice, which aptly serves this book's purpose to foreground "lived" Buddhism. From this chapter, we learn that while monks agree that communal practice is the most important feature of Chinese monastic Buddhism, they do not necessarily engage in it and thus do not benefit from the sense of solidarity it can provide. Lay people, on the other hand, seem to take advantage of the socializing afforded by monastery-organized events such as twice-weekly *nianfo* days or monthly free-noodle days, a tradition specific to South Fujian. Overall, the monastery's liturgical calendar reflects the contractual relationship between devotees who seek cultivation and religious efficiency, and monasteries with financial needs.

Chapter 4 further explores monks' individual practices and the diversity of their experiences. By profiling seven different Kaiyuan monks, Nichols once again focuses on practice over doctrine, and reminds scholars of institutional Buddhism that religiosity is still very much a "diverse and person-centered phenomenon" (p. 112). As a scholar studying a large Vinaya nunnery, I often see monastic life as uniform and normative, and found it helpful to look at it as a collection of individual lives instead. As suggested by this chapter's title, "Monks: 84,000 Dharma Gates," there are at least 84,000 ways to approach monastic practice. From these profiles, Nichols concludes that monastics in post-Mao China display three types of concerns, namely, cultivation, ritual, and administration. He also notices a division between elite monks and regular monks, the latter of whom often disengage from Buddhist practice and focus on mundane activities. That, he states, is due to the lack of both qualified teachers in post-Mao China and institutional structures for studying the Dharma at Kaiyuan Monastery, which monks interpret as a consequence of the ruptured Dharma transmission during the Maoist era.

The book's final section, Part III, concerns material culture, starting with chapter 5 on the role of material culture in constructing religious space. Nichols draws from spatial

studies to identify different patterns of interaction with religious space. For instance, the thirteenth-century East and West twin pagodas appear to be a matter of civic pride for secular people, while they command reverence in religious people. From Kaiyuan Monastery's artifacts and people's engagement with them, the author proposes three typologies that frame the production of identity in relation to material culture: the "Buddha-religion" typology stems from a Buddhist interpretation of the space; the "culture-history" typology from seeing the monastery as a site of cultural, historical, and artistic value; and the "park-leisure" (p. 153) typology from using the monastery to escape the outside world and conduct group activities. Moreover, seeing this space as dynamically constructed also sheds light on self-promotion strategies at Kaiyuan Monastery. Showcasing religious relics and art, preserving historic buildings, and generally beautifying the site can be explained by the monastery leaders' knowledge of these typologies, and their attempt to accommodate diverse uses of the monastic space. In this chapter, the author's non-linguistic, phenomenological approach immerses the reader once more in a vibrant monastic world that cultivates the necessary alterity to enhance each visitor's experience.

In chapter 6, Nichols recounts some of the myths surrounding the monastery's founding and development, delving deeper into the mental dimension of the space. Auspicious signs, he says, are seen as a natural response to greatness, whether the greatness lies in the presence of eminent monks or in the sacredness of places. In turn, these signs confer prestige and power upon the space and its material possessions, making it all the more spiritually efficacious. Such is the case with lotus blossoms blooming on Kaiyuan Monastery's mulberry tree. However, since the modern era, religious efficacy secures popular support but not state support, which comes instead from the monastery's cultural and historical significance. Nichols argues that the dual representation of the monastic space as both efficacious and culturally significant attracts different types of people. Aptly subtitled "Sanctifying and Branding Space," this chapter showcases Kaiyuan Monastery's exceptional ability to memorialize and publicize auspicious events to sacralize the space on one hand, and to brand it as culturally unique on the other. In addition, Nichols makes the particularly interesting point that playing on spatial heterogeneity can inspire religious sentiment and thus challenge Chinese secular modernity.

The final chapter, chapter 7, expands the discussion of monastic space by considering different types of temple management in post-Mao China. It shows how tension can arise from forced interactions between Buddhist institutions and the state, when each have different interests in controlling a religious site, but also how negotiation is possible. Nichols already broached this topic in a previous publication, but his point comes across even more clearly here.[1] His typology of monasteries is based on a wide range of situations, including extreme museumification on one side, supported by "curators," and dedication to religious practice on the other, supported by "revivalists" (p. 188). Kaiyuan Monastery has been especially successful in avoiding museumification and gaining more autonomy for monks. This was achieved by the revivalist abbot, Daoyuan, who managed to reclaim space previously occupied by the Heritage Management Committee and the Temple Administrative Commission, bring an end to entrance ticket sales, and get rid of the souvenir kiosks, among other changes. Although religious revival and the practice of Buddhist monasticism are often seen as inescapably trapped by an oppressive system

[1] Brian J. Nichols, "Tourist Temples and Places of Practice: Charting Multiple Paths in the Revival of Monastic Buddhism," in *Buddhism after Mao: Negotiations, Continuities, and Reinventions*, ed. Ji Zhe, Gareth Fisher, and André Laliberté, 97–119 (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019).

that does not allow much leeway, Kaiyuan Monastery's example is a welcome reminder that institutional Buddhism can also regain some form of agency in post-Mao China.

The conclusion moves beyond this particular case study to draw broader conclusions about the state of contemporary Chinese Buddhist monasticism. Nichols makes an appeal to the academic community, asking that we look at monastic space as skillfully catering to a monastery's institutional needs, rather than as a space of commercialization, devoid of moral principles and religious cultivation. Kaiyuan Monastery's survival skill is, according to Nichols, the main lesson it can teach us. Another point he makes is that a monastery's material culture is key for allowing the space to function for religion, tourism, and leisure. This versatility is ultimately what allows the various forms of religiosity evoked by Chau—discursive/scriptural, personal-cultivational, liturgical, immediate-practical, relational—to take place.[2] All in all, this book is a story of the restoration and revival of lived Chinese Buddhist monasticism in post-Mao China. Admittedly, I have sometimes been blind to monasteries other than the one I have been studying, and this book very effectively reminded me that this idealized version of Buddhist monasticism was not indeed the norm. Although in my case the nunnery is a Vinaya center, "managed by the sangha for the sangha" (p. 205), its institutional needs remain identical to those identified by Nichols: both sites continuously look for political protection and economic stability. This book is thus essential for bringing other religious sites into perspective. However, a more thorough reflection on whether and how Kaiyuan Monastery is representative of other monasteries would have been welcome. One can especially wonder if Kaiyuan monks accurately represent the views of the Chinese monastic community at large, with regard to the current state of temples. Other than that, this is a beautifully documented book that brings the reader right into the middle of lived monasticism through detailed descriptions and personal insights, and makes us direct witnesses of monastic vitality in Post-Mao China.

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Pierre-Emmanuel Roux, *Au tribunal du repentir: La proscription du catholicisme en Chine (1724–1860)*. Paris: CNRS éditions, 2023. 422 pp. €26 (hb). ISBN 978-2-271-13974-0

Au tribunal du repentir (literally, *In the Court of Repentance*) explores legal responses toward Christianity in late imperial China. The historian Pierre-Emmanuel Roux offers us a ground-breaking study that methodologically challenges a number of theories about Christian persecutions in China. Focusing on the period between 1724 and 1860, Roux argues that the Qing (1644–1911) court's response to Christianity remained moderate and cautious despite what missionary and colonial discourses have claimed. Through its legal and judiciary systems, the new Manchu-Chinese administration repeatedly searched for strategies which would favor accommodation, encourage penitence, and circumvent

[2] Adam Yuet Chau, "Modalities of Doing Religion," in *Chinese Religious Life: Culture, Society, and Politics*, ed. David A. Palmer, Glenn Shive, and Philip L. Wickeri, 67–84 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).